

Eco-socialism: 'feasible environmental solutions'

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In October 2007, with the federal election looming, and global warming generating a lot of tepid air in parliaments around the country, a diverse group of people in Adelaide established the Eco-socialist Network to attempt to generate more serious discussion of environmental issues. *Green Left Weekly's* Leslie Richmond spoke to John Rice, activist, socialist, Greens member and one of the initiators of the network.

What is the Eco-socialist Network, and why does it have a consciously socialist orientation?

The Eco-socialist Network is essentially a gathering of people who are interested in exploring socialist, class analysis-based solutions to current environmental, social, and economic problems. We meet monthly, and there's a social element followed by a couple of hours of serious discussion around a particular reading.

It's not a political party, it's a network that aims to help people clarify their ideas and probably conclude that socialist solutions are feasible, and perhaps are the only ones that will extricate the world from its current state.

At the moment we have people who are members of the Greens, the Labor Party, Friends of the Earth, the Socialist Alliance, and a range of religious organisations — the diversity is extraordinary. We held our first meeting in October, with 24 people, and the size has since doubled.

It was important to set up an "intersection set" of the various progressive layers, parties and movements in this city. If we can bring socialists — and those interested in socialist perspectives — together, to thrash out ideas, and then return to our respective sites of activism, hopefully this will have a political "ripple effect".

It's socialist because it's essential that people confronting not just environmental problems, but any problems, understand what kind of system they are operating in. A socialist, class analysis will give people powerful insights into the struggle they're engaged in. The process of winning reforms will at some point run up against the vested interests of capital.

What happens then? A thorough grounding in socialist ideas and history will give people the best chance of responding effectively, because others have been down the road before us and have left us many lessons.

What do you see as the major problems facing the environment movement?

The environmental movements across the world carry with them the baggage of the societies from

which they emerge. Generally, in the advanced capitalist countries they display a strong lack of class consciousness — a product of the wider de-politicised social context. This can result in a focus on individualistic solutions, mysticism, criticisms of consumption rather than the way production is arranged, concerns about overpopulation, and so on. The Eco-socialist Network aims to address each one of these “detours” and to present people with material arguing against what we consider are serious diversions that are paralysing the environmental movement.

@question = You’re also active in solidarity campaigns with Latin America and Cuba. Venezuela and Cuba are implementing some radical approaches to environmental problems. Do you see any lessons for activists in the First World from these examples?

It’s really important that we observe socialism in action, and not just on paper. As it unfolds in Latin America we can learn many things about strategy and tactics through observing good practice and analysing failures.

For example, Cuba has roughly double the growth rate of other countries in Latin America, and yet is recognised by the World Wildlife Fund as the only country in the world with sustainable development. It’s an example of the fact that it’s not development per se that’s the problem, but capitalist development. This is a real lesson for the Western environmental movement, which often argues for a decrease in development and living standards in the developed world. Given thoroughly democratic, community economic planning, there’s no reason why we can’t have wealth for all and a healthy, thriving environment, right across the world.

How does the network relate to current environmental campaigns?

The objective of the Eco-socialist Network is to provide activists in all areas with the analytical frameworks to make them more effective in whatever they do. We know that there’s a strong tendency for parliamentary parties to accommodate to the current economic system, and this includes the Greens.

The key antidote to this is a strong environmental, anti-corporate movement independent of the electoral process. This will tend to mean opportunism and expediency — the great bugbears of progressive movements in advanced capitalist states — are far less salient factors. Having a critical mass of people with a socialist analysis, which includes a really good grounding in historical understandings too, is central to building such a movement.

The Adelaide experience suggests that eco-socialism is an excellent vehicle for left unity. The network has pulled people together who have been in different tendencies for years. A new global factor — the ecological crisis — has created the preconditions for left-leaning people to discover vast regions of common ground.

[If others elsewhere are interested in establishing similar networks, and ultimately connecting up nation-wide, the Adelaide Eco-socialists are keen to assist. To get in touch, email johnfraserrice@yahoo.com.au.]

P.S.

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